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# THE QUARTERLY

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## A GLIMPSE OF ALBERT SIDNEY JOHNSTON THROUGH THE SMOKE OF SHILOH.

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Thirty-nine years ago, April 6th, 1862,<sup>1</sup> was fought one of the bloodiest battles that ever occurred on this continent, called by the Confederates the Battle of Shiloh, from a large log church somewhat to the left of the centre of our line of battle, which was used by General Beauregard as his headquarters. But to begin this tale of the long ago, I will say I was a member at that time of Company C, Wirt Adams's Cavalry; a regiment composed of companies from Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. Our Company was raised chiefly in Choctaw County, Alabama, with contingents from both Washington and Clarke Counties. One of the commissioned officers, Lieutenant White, was from Washington County. The Company was raised early in the summer of 1861 and organized at Mt. Sterling, Alabama, with F. Y. Gaines, captain; W. W. Long, W. P. Cheney and — White, lieutenants.

Our services had been offered through the governor of the State to the Confederate government. We were fully equipped with Sharp's rifles, sabers, Colt's army revolvers, and the regular U. S. dragoon saddles. Our uniform was a heavy gray cassimere, with the proper trimmings incident to that branch of the service. This equipment, including the uniforms, was presented to the company

<sup>1</sup>This narrative was written in 1901.

by Colonel Sam Ruffin, of Choctaw County; hence the name by which we were known, "Ruffin Dragoons." The ladies of Mt. Sterling and its vicinity—women of blessed memory—met from day to day in the Masonic hall of the village, until every member was furnished with a handsome uniform.

Nearly every man furnished his own horse; some were supplied by the more wealthy citizens of the county; others again were complimented by being presented with finer animals than they possessed, or horses more fitted for the hard service they were destined to endure—notably, as I remember, Captain Gaines was presented by Hon. Frank Lyon, of Demopolis, with a fine sorrel. The equipment furnished by Colonel Ruffin, I was informed, cost him about \$30,000. How well I remember the day when we left Mt. Sterling for the front, the 25th of September, 1861. Nearly all of us were young men and boys just from school. The officers were older, and Captain Gaines had seen service in Mexico as an officer of U. S. dragoons. This, of course, gave some prestige, and lent us some prominence in the regiment to which we were assigned. I, myself, was fresh from the class-room, with no experience whatever of any of the ruder sides of life.

We went from Mt. Sterling to Lauderdale, Mississippi, where we were loaded on trains for Memphis, Tennessee. There we were enrolled "for the war in the Confederate service." We went by way of Nashville to Bowling Green, Kentucky, and became a part of General A. S. Johnston's army confronting Buell, the Federal commander in that part of the State. Here we joined other companies, and Wirt Adams's Cavalry Regiment was formed. We were drilled in company and regimental tactics, picketing the front and doing scouting duties.

Early in February, 1862, the Federals, not desiring to force Johnston's position, commenced flanking movements by way of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers, pushing their gunboats up those streams, and gaining the battle of Fort Donelson, where the Confederate General Buckner surrendered a considerable force. This made it apparent that the withdrawal of the army from Bowling Green was imperative.

After the Battle of Fort Donelson, General Grant pushed his forces further south to the vicinity of Pittsburg, a small village on the Tennessee River, not more than twenty-five miles from Corinth,

Mississippi, where the Confederates were rapidly gathering to oppose his advance. At this particular place, General Johnston came prominently into view before the country and the world. His methods and strategy had been severely criticized by a part of the Southern press. Mile after mile of the country had been given up without a blow, and apparently it was not understood or approved. It was said a delegation even went to Richmond and demanded the general's removal. But Mr. Davis said to them "if Albert Sidney Johnston is not a general, I have none; so they got back in time to see one of the masterly moves of the war—one by which undoubtedly the conqueror of Lee at Appomattox would have been relegated to the shades had not death overtaken Johnston on the evening of April 6, 1862.

Three days' rations were ordered in the haversacks, and our regiment took the road in the direction of Monterey. I think this was Wednesday, the 3d of April. Other roads leading in that direction were choked with moving masses of men, infantry, and artillery, with their necessary trains of ordnance and commissary stores. The weather had been rainy and the roads were bad. Who of us that was there and toiled through that rain and mud can ever forget it?

On the morning of the 5th of April, Company C of Wirt Adams's Regiment was ordered to report to the commanding general for escort duty. Our uniforms were new and our horses in good condition, and altogether we did not make a bad appearance. Well do I recollect the look of wonder and inquiry that swept over young and beardless faces when we heard the words of the order. We knew of the lonely vigil on the far out picket post, the firing line on the skirmish front, scouting, and so on, but the idea of being escort to the head of the army brought up all sorts of questions, and our officers were plied with inquiries.

Right here let us notice some conditions that always held between the Confederate private and his officers. Off duty, we all were free and easy. Even on duty, except on drill and parade, there ran all through the army an easy tolerance that lent itself so admirably to both rank and file when the individualism of the soldier was demanded in hottest battle; when lines irregularly rushed to the charge, or beaten back, would suddenly nerve themselves to a stand and again rush forward—not shoulder to shoulder, or

elbows touching, as we often read in fancy sketches, but every man and officer acting, as it were, individually, and each feeling as if the result depended upon himself alone. So in camp the license of the soldier was controlled by the "morale" of the man, and hence the proverbial easy intercourse between officers and men.

However, we soon found out our duties as a general's escort, though our lot together, alas, was too short. The night of the 5th of April, General Johnston bivouacked in a skirt of woods near an old field, an infantry line of battle just in front and extending through the dense woods and thickets to right and left, with batteries of field artillery just in the rear and occupying assigned positions given them by the staff.

From early in the day, General Johnston had been anxious for the more prompt arrival of the troops. Delay after delay occurred. Staff officers had been sent back to urge haste, but it developed that the two corps of Bragg and Polk had become entangled with each other, on account of the narrow muddy roads, and the miring ordnance and artillery teams, and a part of one of these commands had to diverge into the woods and cut a new road before the forward movement could be hastened. It was evident that the attack was to begin on the arrival of the troops in position, and but for this delay the battle would have opened on Saturday. What might have been the result had the plans of the general been carried out can now only be left to conjecture. Certain it is, Buell would not have been in reach, for on that day his army was nearly twenty-five miles away, and the history of the second day would not so have been written, and General Grant would not have been at Appomattox to receive General Lee's surrender.

But I am anticipating. The escort bivouacked near the general's headquarters. Our slim rations in the haversacks were exhausted, and our commissary wagon was far in the rear. Sentinels were detailed under a proper officer and thrown around the general's tent; night and quiet had settled down immediately around us. Only the distant tramp of detailed detachments as they hurried to join their respective brigades, or the peculiar rumble of some battery of artillery, until then delayed in the mud, struck the ear. Silence had been enjoined on the troops, and no one can forget the weird effect and impressions made upon one, silently gazing through the gloom of the woods on the still ranks of men

lying upon their arms, with the flags and guidons hanging limp on their staffs, and the long lines dimmer to the eye as night fell upon the scene. The night was dark and damp, and the April wind stirring the boughs of the tall trees sang in the hearts of many men that lay beneath, as they thought of home, a dirge of death.

Our sentinels, in regular reliefs, guarded headquarters. All were hungry. Our horses had no corn, and our men no bread. R. M. Hearin, of Bladon Springs, Alabama, was on guard that night, his relief coming on in the early morning, and I have heard him tell how the early breakfast of the staff affected him. They would throw away crusts of bread and bits of crackers as they talked, and as his regular beat carried him near the circle of officers, who sat or stood around the camp chest, he would pick up some of the rejected crusts and munch and listen as he walked. Towards morning, general officers had been gathering at the headquarters, and daylight revealed a historic group. Some had come voluntarily, some had been summoned by courier. Mr. Hearin says, hungry and fagged out as he was, he was exceedingly interested by the tense but subdued manner of the group. The argument even then was for or against a general attack. It seems that all the officers did not agree with General Johnston, notably the second in command, who favored a forced reconnaissance, and then dealing with details as they developed.

About six o'clock, still early for the cloudy April morning, and whilst they still ate crackers and sipped coffee, some talking, General Johnston mainly a listener, the heavy denseness of the air was jarred by an ominous sound apparently not far off. All knew what it meant. General Johnston was standing erect, if I remember rightly, when the roar of the gun broke upon his ear. He immediately faced the group and said, "Gentlemen, the ball has opened; no time for argument now," or words to that effect, and asking an officer to note the time, he immediately called for his horse. "Boots and saddles" for our company was sounded, and we sprang into the saddle. How well I remember the mien and manner of General Hardee, as he quitted the group and made for his horse held a short distance away by an orderly. His form was erect; his stride long but regular; and as he walked he gathered up his trailing sword, and tucking it under his arm so reached his horse.

At a gallop he went in the direction of his command, which was mainly to our left, as I now recall these incidents. A portion of the troops that were near us had silently moved forward in the night. Perhaps the whole line moved forward; I do not know, but I remember we had several hundred yards to ride in the direction we took before we came in sight of the lines now fully engaged.

Immediately following the opening gun, portions of lines seemed to me to commence firing by volleys. Then the division to which we were advancing became engaged all at once; the file-firing seemed continuous, as if the men were engaged in close and steady duel. The artillery to right and left of us and in front also had now awakened to a continual volume of sound—no stop, no intermission. Now, for the first time, I heard the sound of “dread artillery,” for almost immediately the enemy responded with every available gun, and round shot and shell came through or over the ranks in a storm. The mists of the morning were heavy, and the smoke clinging close to the ground made it difficult to see ten paces in front.

I shall remember the first wounded man I saw as we passed in. He was half reclining near the foot of an oak tree with an awful wound in his stomach, made apparently by a fragment of a shell, a portion of his bowels protruding and partly lying on the ground. Evidently he had just been wounded, for as General Johnston stopped to talk to him a moment, his eyes were bright and face animated as he was telling the general how the Yankees broke and fled at the first fire. General Johnston ordered the surgeon who was along with us to stop and give him some attention.

About this time, or perhaps a few yards further on, the general was notified that part of our line was giving way. Instantly he quickened to a gallop, with the staff and escort following, and right into the *mêlée* we plunged. Here was my first sight of the “battle joined.” It must have been a part of Hindman’s line, for we saw that officer in one of the most dramatic scenes I witnessed during the whole war. Mounted on a fine horse, his uniform covered with an oil poncho which glistened in the light rain that was falling, he was just behind his line, whooping like a Comanche, with his horse in a dead run, and from one end of his brigade to the other he was urging his charging column forward on the enemy,

who were giving Rolands for Olivers, it seemed to me, as fast as they could be swapped. Suddenly a shell tore through General Hindman's horse, throwing him to the ground. The general, not hurt, was on his feet in a moment, still urging his men forward.

General Johnston's presence soon rallied the broken line to the right of where we saw Hindman, and as the smoke for an instant lifted, I saw the men leaping forward to a battery right at us. And right here I saw a Yankee hero. As our men rushed on, I saw a man standing still by one of the guns, while others were fleeing. All this was but an instant, for the smoke immediately covered the scene, and I do not know what was his fate. The only damage we sustained here was a few horses wounded.

General Johnston, quickly leaving this part of the line, went towards the right. Always at a gallop, we traversed a great part of the field. He seemed cool and collected all the time. Only once did I descry any gleam of enthusiasm. Staff and various other officers were continually galloping up to him and off again. My position in column brought me at times very near him, and I remember that a young officer came up at full speed and said something to the general, who listened intently, then suddenly throwing out his right arm and bringing it in with a curve said: "Tell General Breckinridge to sweep them into the river." The night before, General Breckinridge was in command of the reserves, and at that time these troops were engaging the enemy on the extreme right and driving them.

About ten o'clock, or perhaps a little earlier, we rode into one of the enemy's encampments, from which our infantry had previously swept them. The tents were pitched in company front and were full of the impediments of a field force. Evidently the men had been interrupted at an early breakfast, for at some of the campfires the breakfast was untouched, and some of the soldiers, partly undressed, lay dead in the tents. Yet they say no surprise was ever acknowledged by General Grant. I do not know how this was, for they fought stubbornly from position. Some of our after-experiences of surprisals under General Wheeler made us think of occasions when we knew that surprised Yankees could and would fight. I will not notice further this controversy, but I here add my testimony to the gallant stands made hour after hour through this day of rout by that Federal army. The carnage of this field



was terrible, nearly one man in three being either killed or wounded. Battery after battery was disabled, and their brave dead lay silently attesting how gallantly they had stuck to their guns. Particularly I remember one Union battery; the wheels of some of the guns were shattered, and dead men and dead and wounded horses lay around. The men seemed to be all young and clad in new uniforms with the red cap and red stripe of the artillery branch of the service still fresh and defiant on their lifeless forms. Their wounds were ghastly; and, though they were invaders of our Southern homes, as I looked into the pallid young faces, I boyishly felt pity for my dead enemies.

Directly after leaving that part of the field, where the order above mentioned was sent to General Breckinridge, General Johnston made other rapid moves, first to one part of the field, then to another. I do not remember our ever coming in contact with General Beauregard; but for a part of the day that general was very active on the left, though sick the most of the time, as reported. He had two horses killed or wounded under him during the day.

While passing through one of the encampments, we stopped long enough to snatch a morsel of food, for, remember, we were still fasting. Fortunately a sutler's shop was near and into that I went. Boy-like I looked for cake, and I got it, too. Some of us did not forget our poor horses, and I for one quickly bagged a feed of oats and carried it until my horse could eat it. How strange it is these little things should occur to me now as I write. At one time General Johnston's movement was so rapid and the smoke so thick we did not keep up with him, and I remember how he turned to us his grave face and steady eye as he watched us in column "at attention" close in upon him.

A great many things occurred during the day that I have only an indistinct mental view of now, and I can not recall them. One I will mention. Away off to the right in some fields we were passing through, one of the staff—Colonel Preston, I think—called attention to a body of men who, he was apprehensive, might be part of a Federal column. At any rate, he called for a scout, and Jesse A. Norwood was sent to him. Norwood was promised mention, if his work should be satisfactory, in the official report of the

battle; and our comrade's name and his special service that day were duly placed on record.

I hope the digression will not be condemned if I introduce here an anecdote of this same beloved comrade of the olden days. It was away up in Kentucky and before General Breckinridge had thrown his lot with us. Our regiment had been ordered to meet the general on a certain road and escort him with honors to Bowling Green. However, he did not come then; but a few days afterwards he did come rather unheralded to us, and, as fortune would have it, passed through our company on his way. We were on the railroad, and those not on duty were taking the warmth of a winter's sun, when some one notified us of the approach of the distinguished ex-vice-president of the United States, who was now coming to join the Confederates. Various comments, pro and con, had been freely passed on his delay, and some thought he had delayed too long his coming, accusing him of temporizing, etc. He was almost upon us before we knew of his presence. We were alert, of course, in a moment, and every man on his feet. Somehow, in those days, apple-jack was mighty good, and had a way of getting into our canteens. Its very odor was exhilarating, and the boys were always happy and exceedingly plain-spoken when it had given the inspiration. That day our comrade was frank and to the point. As the distinguished ex-official was passing near, Norwood was heard to say with some little expressive expletive attached, "As they wouldn't give you what you wanted over there, you have come to us." General Breckinridge, dressed in citizen's clothes, with tall beaver hat, was just stepping over the rails at the time, and with us heard every word that was said. Boy-like, some of us tittered; but a smile lit up the handsome features of Breckinridge, while the boys took the cue and "opened up," giving the noted Kentuckian his first Confederate ovation. Norwood was afterward a lieutenant in our company, and was captured in one of our famous raids through Tennessee under General Wheeler. He and Captain Reid, one of Wheeler's staff, were captured together.

A great part of the battlefield of Shiloh was wooded, and broken up in ravines, through which small streams flowed, either into Owl Creek on our right, or into Snake Creek on our left. Between these two historic streams, and with the Tennessee River in their rear,

the Federal army was marshaled, and it heroically strove to make a stand for its flag and honor. Thicket and woodland were cut and gashed by ball and shell; the dead lay thick on slope and shallow, and the wounded of both armies were carried back to field hospitals, established as convenience or necessity prompted. The din and roar of battle was incessant, and the "rebel yell" as continuous as the stream of fire. Flag and man, bush and brake, seemed to join in the wild and yet wilder enthusiasm, and it was funny to see the old, staid West Point officers with hat in hand ringing an heroic measure to its music.

It is told of Early in Virginia that at one time General Jackson had severely reproved him for some license a part of his troops had taken on the march. A short time afterward, he, with Jackson and other officers, stood watching the storming of the enemy's line by the same troops. Again and again they were thrown back, and anxiety was shown on every face; finally, with the well-known yell, they swept the guns. As they disappeared in the smoke, General Lee's "bad old man" could stand it no longer. Forgetting the presence of General Jackson, he threw his hat on the ground, and, jumping on it, cried out, "D—n those fellows, they can steal hereafter what they want."

And so it was, east and west, the same wild music of our tattered ranks always carried consternation to the foe. With the Yankees, it was entirely different. Their slogan seemed to be perfunctory. It was "huzza-huzza," and sometimes "hip-hip-huzza," especially in the earlier days of the war. However, toward the close of the war, they too learned to "holler" in some sort of civilized way.

The bloody day had turned toward its evening; its sulphurous smoke was getting thicker around our beloved chieftain. Sherman on the right had commenced forming his last lines; their coign of vantage called the "Hornet's Nest" was being girdled with bayonet and crested with cannon, and their troops were gradually driven in toward it. Later than this, perhaps about four o'clock, Gibson and his Louisianians suffered greatly. General Johnston was closing in rapidly; the lines were narrowing, and the last camps taken. Right here, we were left by the general, and we did not see him again.

It must have been about half past two in the afternoon that his

preparations for the final blow were made. A part of a brigade was sweeping forward toward the position we occupied. Some troops in the last camp were fighting with platoon front—an old formation adapted to defile firing. The troops were in column, platoon front, all moving forward; the first platoon would fire, then break in the center, counter-march to the rear, and expose the second platoon, which went through the same movement; then third, then fourth, all the time the whole body of men moving forward. It was a beautiful movement, and at school under Gilman's old tactics I had drilled in the same, and it deeply interested me. During the whole war I never saw it repeated.

General Johnston was near the tents with his back turned, looking to the rear and over and beyond us. The smoke was dense, the din cataclysmal. Looking toward us, the general pointed to a nearby depression in the ground—no word was spoken or could be heard. Captain Gaines understood it as an order to uncover the front of a regiment of infantry that was approaching the general in line of battle. I was very near to its right flank as it passed us, and knowing of the fierce grapple that was awaiting it, I looked into the faces of the men, who were trying to keep in regular order as they advanced over the rough uneven ground. They were pale but steady, seemingly intent on every order shouted by regimental or company officers.

General Johnston still sat his horse, calm and immovable, watching them. When they came, say within twenty feet of him, with a slight motion of his hand, as if in salute, he turned his horse and rode slowly in their front, and directly all had disappeared. That was our last glimpse of Johnston through the smoke of Shiloh.

We waited in the position assigned us, having one man, and perhaps a horse or two, wounded while in this ravine. The storm of battle kept creeping into the distance, the musket balls that had mostly flown above us now and then dropping spent of force. We dismounted to let our horses eat and munch the oaten luncheon we had captured earlier in the day, while we ourselves finished the cake of the Yankee commissary. Still we waited; no news nor orders. Finally an officer approached and had some talk with Captain Gaines. We noticed there was no hurry; the men were anxious, but no news was vouchsafed to us. Perhaps other orders

came to the captain; I do not remember, but finally he mounted and started out towards the left of the line.

Then the rumor ran through the company that the general was dead. Some supposed we were going to General Beauregard. But we did not; halt after halt was made, and, as night followed, the volume of rifle fire ceased, and the terrible shells of the Federal gunboats increased. They were shelling their captured camps, for they well knew the hungry Confederates were swarming through the tents. It is now well understood that the halt by General Beauregard about sundown was fatal to our overwhelming their entire army. Bragg held the front and was ready to go under the bluff.

While the lines were waiting and wondering what it meant, Dr. T. J. Savage, now of Mobile, then an officer in one of the Alabama regiments, told me he crept forward to have a look. He said he could see masses of men huddled together and apparently without formation. In fact they were boarding the gunboats as fast as the capacity of the staging would allow. The gallant Prentiss with the larger part of his brigade had been captured some time in the evening; hundreds of other prisoners had been all day streaming to our rear; the quartermaster and other ordnance officers had been gathering in the captured spoil, and the surgeons were red and busy with their dreadful work.

At night, in our bivouac, we were not without plenty to appease the hunger of the day. Huge tins from the camp stores were procured and filled with coffee; and, as the fiery missiles of the gunboats cleft the air above us with their awful shrieks, we reveled in the fatness of the enemy's camp.

The morrow has a history of its own.